**Ethnic Groups**

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| [Sri Lanka Table of Contents](http://countrystudies.us/sri-lanka/)  The people of Sri Lanka are divided into ethnic groups whose conflicts have dominated public life since the nineteenth century. The two main characteristics that mark a person's ethnic heritage are language and religion, which intersect to create four major ethnic groups--the Sinhalese, the Tamils, the Muslims, and the Burghers. Ethnic divisions are not based on race or physical appearance; some Sri Lankans claim to determine the ethnicity of a person by his facial characteristics or color, but in reality such premises are not provable. There is nothing in the languages or religious systems in Sri Lanka that officially promotes the social segregation of their adherents, but historical circumstances have favored one or more of the groups at different times, leading to hostility and competition for political and economic power.  **Sinhalese**  The Sinhalese are the largest ethnic group in the country, officially comprising 11 million people or 74 percent of the population in 1981. They are distinguished primarily by their language, Sinhala, which is a member of the Indo-European linguistic group that includes Hindi and other north Indian tongues as well as most of the languages of Europe. It is likely that groups from north India introduced an early form of Sinhala when they migrated to the island around 500 B.C., bringing with them the agricultural economy that has remained dominant to the twentieth century. From early times, however, Sinhala has included a large number of loan words and constructs from Tamil, and modern speech includes many expressions from European languages, especially English. The Sinhalese claim to be descendants of Prince Vijaya and his band of immigrants from northern India, but it is probable that the original group of Sinhalese immigrants intermarried with indigenous inhabitants. The Sinhalese gradually absorbed a wide variety of castes or tribal groups from the island and from southern India during the last 2,500 years.  The Buddhist religion reinforces the solidarity of the Sinhalese as an ethnic community. In 1988 approximately 93 percent of the Sinhala speakers were Buddhists, and 99.5 percent of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka spoke Sinhala. The most popular Sinhalese folklore, literature, and rituals teach children from an early age the uniqueness of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the long relationship between Buddhism and the culture and politics of the island, and the importance of preserving this fragile cultural inheritance. Buddhist monks are accorded great respect and participate in services at the notable events in people's lives. To become a monk is a highly valued career goal for many young men. The neighboring Buddhist monastery or shrine is the center of cultural life for Sinhalese villagers.  Their shared language and religion unite all ethnic Sinhalese, but there is a clear difference between the "Kandyan" and the "low-country" Sinhalese. Because the Kingdom of Kandy in the highlands remained independent until 1818, conservative cultural and social forms remained in force there. English education was less respected, and traditional Buddhist education remained a vital force in the preservation of Sinhalese culture. The former Kandyan nobility retained their social prestige, and caste divisions linked to occupational roles changed slowly. The plains and the coast of Sri Lanka, on the other hand, experienced great change under 400 years of European rule. Substantial numbers of coastal people, especially among the Karava caste, converted to Christianity through determined missionary efforts of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British; 66 percent of the Roman Catholics and 43 percent of the Protestants in the early 1980s were Sinhalese. Social mobility based on economic opportunity or service to the colonial governments allowed entire caste or kin groups to move up in the social hierarchy. The old conceptions of noble or servile status declined, and a new elite developed on the basis of its members' knowledge of European languages and civil administration. The Dutch legal system changed traditional family law. A wider, more cosmopolitan outlook differentiated the low-country Sinhalese from the more "old fashioned" inhabitants of highlands.  **Tamils**  The people collectively known as the Tamils, comprising 2,700,000 persons or approximately 18 percent of the population in 1981, use the Tamil language as their native tongue. Tamil is one of the Dravidian languages found almost exclusively in peninsular India. It existed in South Asia before the arrival of people speaking Indo-European languages in about 1500 B.C. Tamil literature of a high quality has survived for at least 2,000 years in southern India, and although the Tamil language absorbed many words from northern Indian languages, in the late twentieth century it retained many forms of a purely Dravidian speech--a fact that is of considerable pride to its speakers. Tamil is spoken by at least 40 million people in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu (the "land of the Tamils"), and by millions more in neighboring states of southern India and among Tamil emigrants throughout the world.  There was a constant stream of migration from southern India to Sri Lanka from prehistoric times. Once the Sinhalese controlled Sri Lanka, however, they viewed their own language and culture as native to the island, and in their eyes Tamil-speaking immigrants constituted a foreign ethnic community. Some of these immigrants appear to have abandoned Tamil for Sinhala and become part of the Sinhalese caste system. Most however, continued to speak Tamil and looked toward southern India as their cultural homeland. Their connections with Tamil Nadu received periodic reinforcement during struggles between the kings of Sri Lanka and southern India that peaked in the wars with the Chola. It is probable that the ancestors of many Tamil speakers entered the country as a result of the Chola conquest, for some personal names and some constructions used in Sri Lankan Tamil are reminiscent of the Chola period.  The Tamil speakers in Sri Lanka are divided into two groups that have quite different origins and relationships to the country. The Sri Lankan Tamils trace their immigration to the distant past and are effectively a native minority. In 1981 they numbered 1,886,872, or 12.7 percent of the population. The Indian Tamils are either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants who came under British sponsorship to Sri Lanka to work on plantations in the central highlands. In 1981 they numbered 818,656, or 5.5 percent of the population. Because they lived on plantation settlements, separate from other groups, including the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Indian Tamils have not become an integral part of society and indeed have been viewed by the Sinhalese as foreigners. The population of Indian Tamils has been shrinking through programs repatriating them to Tamil Nadu.  Ethnic Tamils are united to each other by their common religions beliefs, and the Tamil language and culture. Some 80 percent of the Sri Lankan Tamils and 90 percent of the Indian Tamils are Hindus. They have little contact with Buddhism, and they worship the Hindu pantheon of gods. Their religious myths, stories of saints, literature, and rituals are distinct from the cultural sources of the Sinhalese. The caste groups of the Tamils are also different from those of the Sinhalese, and they have their rationale in religious ideologies that the Sinhalese do not share. Religion and caste do, however, create divisions within the Tamil community. Most of the Indian Tamils are members of low Indian castes that are not respected by the upper- and middle-level castes of the Sri Lankan Tamils. Furthermore, a minority of the Tamils--4.3 percent of the Sri Lankan Tamils and 7.6 percent of the Indian Tamils--are converts to Christianity, with their own places of worship and separate cultural lives. In this way, the large Tamil minority in Sri Lanka is effectively separated from the mainstream Sinhalese culture and is fragmented into two major groups with their own Christian minorities.  **Muslims**  Muslims, who make up approximately 7 percent of the population, comprise a group of minorities practicing the religion of Islam. As in the case of the other ethnic groups, the Muslims have their own separate sites of worship, religious and cultural heroes, social circles, and even languages. The Muslim community is divided into three main sections--the Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Moors, and the Malays, each with its own history and traditions.  The Sri Lankan Moors make up 93 percent of the Muslim population and 7 percent of the total population of the country (1,046,926 people in 1981). They trace their ancestry to Arab traders who moved to southern India and Sri Lanka some time between the eighth and fifteenth centuries, adopted the Tamil language that was the common language of Indian Ocean trade, and settled permanently in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Moors lived primarily in coastal trading and agricultural communities, preserving their Islamic cultural heritage while adopting many southern Asian customs. During the period of Portuguese colonization, the Moors suffered from persecution, and many moved to the Central Highlands, where their descendants remain. The language of the Sri Lankan Moors is Tamil, or a type of "Arabic Tamil" that contains a large number of Arabic words. On the east coast, their family lines are traced through women, as in kinship systems of the southwest Indian state of Kerala, but they govern themselves through Islamic law.  The Indian Moors are Muslims who trace their origins to immigrants searching for business opportunities during the colonial period. Some of these people came to the country as far back as Portuguese times; others arrived during the British period from various parts of India. The Memon, originally from Sind (in modern Pakistan), first arrived in 1870; in the 1980s they numbered only about 3,000. The Bohra and the Khoja came from northwestern India (Gujarat State) after 1880; in the 1980s they collectively numbered fewer than 2,000. These groups tended to retain their own places of worship and the languages of their ancestral homelands.  The Malays originated in Southeast Asia. Their ancestors came to the country when both Sri Lanka and Indonesia were colonies of the Dutch. Most of the early Malay immigrants were soldiers, posted by the Dutch colonial administration to Sri Lanka, who decided to settle on the island. Other immigrants were convicts or members of noble houses from Indonesia who were exiled to Sri Lanka and who never left. The main source of a continuing Malay identity is their common Malay language (*bahasa melayu*), which includes numerous words absorbed from Sinhalese and Tamil, and is spoken at home. In the 1980s, the Malays comprised about 5 percent of the Muslim population in Sri Lanka.  **Burghers**  The term Burgher was applied during the period of Dutch rule to European nationals living in Sri Lanka. By extension it came to signify any permanent resident of the country who could trace ancestry back to Europe. Eventually it included both Dutch Burghers and Portuguese Burghers. Always proud of their racial origins, the Burghers further distanced themselves from the mass of Sri Lankan citizens by immersing themselves in European culture, speaking the language of the current European colonial government, and dominating the best colonial educational and administrative positions. They have generally remained Christians and live in urban locations. Since independence, however, the Burgher community has lost influence and in turn has been shrinking in size because of emigration. In 1981 the Burghers made up .3 percent (39,374 people) of the population.  **Veddah**  The Veddah are the last descendants of the ancient inhabitants of Sri Lanka, predating the arrival of the Sinhalese. They have long been viewed in the popular imagination as a link to the original hunting-and-gathering societies that gradually disappeared as the Sinhalese spread over the island. In the 1980s, Veddah lived in the eastern highlands, where some had been relocated as a result of the Mahaweli Garga Program. They have not preserved their own language, and they resemble their poorer Sinhalese neighbors, living in small rural settlements. The Veddah have become more of a caste than a separate ethnic group, and they are generally accepted as equal in rank to the dominant Goyigama caste of the Sinhalese.  More about the [Population of Sri Lanka](http://countrystudies.us/sri-lanka/37.htm).    Custom Search  Source: *U.S. Library of Congress* |